

The Syncretic Turn

Cross-Cultural Practices in the Age of Multiculturalism

Jean Fisher

In part, the trajectory of this inquiry has been prompted by two related “blindspots” in the debates on cultural identity and “multiculturalism” as they relate to the work of the black and non-European artist, both of which lead back to a question of the efficacy of art itself. The first involves the overall failure of “mainstream” art criticism and aesthetics to conceptualize art beyond the boundaries of Eurocentric aesthetic theories and their hierarchical value systems. A case in point was the posthumous retrospective of the Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica at the Witte de With in Rotterdam in 1992. There, a European art critic was overheard commenting that Oiticica’s work was “incoherent” since it covered a plurality of practices and thus “wasn’t art” – a surprising assessment if only considering the protean neo-Duchampian/Dadaist gestures of the late 1960s and ’70s, where Oiticica’s work may be partly situated. Other critics recognized Oiticica’s relation to conceptualism, but dismissed this as “inauthentic” – his practice was merely a reflection of Euroamerican tendencies and therefore wasn’t authentically “Brazilian.” That European critics, with little experience of other cultures, assume they are qualified to make such assertions is a problem yet to be addressed. Such attitudes are commonplace: on the one hand, the erection of an exoticizing/marginalizing screen through which the work of the non-European is “read,” distracting attention away from its particular aesthetic concerns; and, on the other, an ignorance of the diversity of modernisms each inflected differently through the specific contexts of cultures outside the northern metropolises.

As it happens, Oiticica himself refused to call his work “art” for the very reason that the term is tainted with academicism. His project was to bring art out of the private domain of the studio into the public arena, using both local vernaculars

Jean Fisher, “The Syncretic Turn: Cross-Cultural Practices in the Age of Multiculturalism,” pp. 32–9 from *New Histories: The Institute of Contemporary Art*, eds. Lia Gangitano and Steven Nelson (Boston: The Institute, 1996). Note: Revised slightly. Reprinted with kind permission of ICA (The Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston and the author).

and modernist languages, in the belief that the essence of art was not in creative genius or the unique object, but in the processes of thought and action – in invention, play, and transformation – in which both artist and viewer were participants. Of course, if one's idea of art was as the privileged bearer of some transcendental meaning, then Oiticica's work was *not* "art." We have here, then, two irreconcilable concepts of art: one, the academic museum object with strictly defined codes, and the other, a transformative and open-ended *process*.

The second "blindspot" involves the discussion of context itself. By the late 1970s, many art writers, myself included, impatient with the lack of intellectual rigor of art criticism and the narrow perspective of art history, began to adopt an interdisciplinary approach that extended outside the field of art. Aesthetic theory has been slow to radicalize itself relative to these other fields, such that questions of the aesthetic efficacy of a work have tended to be overshadowed by those of context – national or ethnic identity, sociopolitics, and so forth. I am not advocating a return to some hermetic formalist critique, but asking how we might more effectively understand the processes of art, especially where cross-cultural symbolic orders are employed, without making them a sub-category of, say, anthropology or sociology. Visual art remains a materially based process, functioning on the level of *affect*, not purely semiotics – i.e., a synaesthetic relation is established between work and viewer, which is *in excess of* *visuality*. It involves rather enigmatic sensations such as the vibrations of rhythm and spatiality, a sense of scale and volume, of touch and smell, of lightness, stillness, silence or noise, all of which resonate with the body and its reminiscences and operate on the level of "sense" not "meaning." For such reasons alone the work of art cannot be grasped in reproduction. Whilst this is obvious to a practitioner, it is not always so for an anthropologist or literary theorist, for whom art is more a cultural product than a dynamic *process* or complex set of immanent and sensuous relations. If one adds to this the fact that work springs from an articulation between whatever minimal "codes" produce the recognition of a process or thing as "art," together with the particular psychosocial history of its maker, then ultimately the meaning of any artwork is not strictly determinable and is potentially as nuanced as the number of viewers who interact with it. Insofar as it draws on local vernaculars or experience, repetitions, the "grain of the voice," and the response of the receiver, art is closer to the *parole* of oral storytelling than most other visual or literary forms (it is difficult to avoid linguistic analogies!) Non-academic art is a speaking not an already spoken. In short, art criticism tends not to look at or address the experience of the work but at a commodifiable level of context.

This has deeply affected the relation between art from the black or non-European artist and the Western art system – its historiography, market, aesthetic, and critical values – where the greater the work's visibility in terms of racial or ethnic context, the less it is able to speak as an individual utterance. The galleries and museums have responded to the demand to end cultural marginality simply by exhibiting more non-European artists, although on a selective and representative basis, provided that they demonstrate appropriate signs of cultural difference. This is to

exoticize. Globetrotting has become a popular curatorial pastime, resulting in “geo-ethnic entertainments” that maintain the unequal intellectual hierarchies between the art practices of the European and non-European, whilst also masking their unequal economic and power relations. Above all, they evade the complex negotiations that must take place between European aesthetic languages and those of the rest of the world. For the West to frame and evaluate all cultural productions through its own criteria and stereotypes of otherness is to reduce them to a spectacle of essentialist racial or ethnic typology and to ignore their *individual insights and human values* – a treatment not meted out to the work of white European artists.

Thus, one side of the problem has been institutional – a conservatism of traditional Western critical and curatorial practices that have assumed the universality of their own criteria, that any form of making can be translated unproblematically into Western terms of reference, and that any work incorporating cross-cultural codes is *ipso facto* “inauthentic” and inferior to a “pure” cultural identity (the “blind spot” of Magiciens de la terre in 1989). What is valued by art institutions becomes national patrimony, which in turn is intimately tied to myths of an idealized national identity, not only on the level of assumed ethnic characteristics but also through a consensus of what constitutes a sophisticated internationalism (one which pertains throughout the élite of Lagos and São Paulo as well as London and Paris). But the internationalism in question is also Eurocentric – a universalist language of value judgments. Until this is broken down, and Western culture accepts itself as a *parochialism* amongst many others, then we cannot have a true multiculturalism in which all perspectives have equal value.

At the same time, for reasons of artistic and economic survival, black and non-European artists have had to acquiesce to promotion through the commodified signs of ethnicity, which renders them complicit with the Western desire for the exotic other, against which it can measure its own superiority. The exoticized artist is marked not as a thinking subject and individual innovator in his and her own right, but as a bearer of prescribed and homogenized cultural signs and meanings. To be locked into the frame of ethnicity is also to be locked *out* of a rigorous philosophical and historical debate that risks crippling the work’s intellectual development and excluding it from the global circuit of ideas where it rightfully belongs. But the problem remains how *to create a place* from which it is possible to speak and to be heard without compromising one’s life experience whatever its source(s).

A rather perverse turn of thought is required that reconceptualizes cultural marginality no longer as a problem of invisibility but one of an excessive *visibility* in terms of a reading of cultural difference that is too readily marketable. This also relates to the tendency in colonial thought to equate what is visually verifiable with “truth,” where superficial characteristics reflect the inner truth of being. The fact that black and non-European artists are still “expected” to produce either “ethnic” or “political” art, whilst other positions are tacitly ignored, suggests that “visibility” alone has not been adequate to provide the conditions for an independent speaking subject. Aside from the problem of institutional “indifference,” we might also look at the strategies of art practice itself.

Much art of the late 1970s and '80s with a deliberate gender, sex, or racial political agenda coming from within the Western system focused on *visibility* in the form of autobiography: a "bearing witness" to an individual experience of the world to point out that the official version of reality was *not universal*. At the time this strategy had legitimacy, since, within the master narratives of Western art, other realities were excluded and this needed to be debated. However, the autobiographical in itself is no guarantee of an "authentic voice," much less a critique of the determinations of the symbolic order, since the self is inescapably social in its formation. However, if there was no essential, "authentic" self, then, as has often been said, what was already a construct could be reconstructed to self-determinable ends.

Promotion through a politics of racial difference during the early 1980s, inspired in Britain by the frustration of a young generation of black artists emerging from art schools into an art system from which they were excluded, had limited success; a deliberately provocative tactic of cultural essentialism helped to force cultural studies onto the academic map and siphoned some institutional money toward so-called "ethnic arts," galleries, and magazines. However, these strategies have also been counter-productive *for art*; where the work has been incorporated exclusively into identity politics, it has tended to become a sub-category of sociology or anthropology, diminishing its aesthetic or critical efficacy. Where art takes up an essentialist position – even if this is a masquerading tactic – it risks becoming excluded by the exclusionary politics it proffers, addressing a limited constituency which cannot alone sustain an adequate production or promotional support system. An absurd situation arises in which black artists are expected to make art only about "black" issues – as if, for instance, racism was not a subject for representation in dominant white culture. Moreover, these issues are already institutionalized in the rhetoric of the mass media, and hence "containable."

The problem of identity debated through the conventionally circulating signs of "otherness" creates a visibility that is measurable, thereby foreclosing that enigmatic space in which the coherence of my selfhood could be challenged, or different and common realities imagined. The value of such work was that it reclaimed art from its entrapment in the ahistorical space of formalism and gave back historical and geographic specificity; its failure rested in its inability to enter a more philosophical and aesthetic debate that would interrogate the deep structures of our relations to reality. Perhaps, one needs to think of cultural expression not on the level of the sign but in terms of concept and deep structure: to consider the work's internal rationale and what governs the aesthetic choices an artist might make about materials and process, and, in particular, like Hélio Oiticica, to pay attention to the *structures of reception* – the work's psychosomatic relation with the viewer. Artworks from symbolic systems alien to our own *do* have an effect on us, but we will not mutually benefit from such encounters if we allow the prescribed screens of ethnicity or anthropology to interpret aesthetic experience for us.

Over the past few years, the most popularly cited model of cross-cultural expression has been Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity.¹ On the face of it, this seems a

useful model (if it is also possible to imagine that somewhere in this alienating world a human being exists in a “non-hybrid” state). Sarat Maharaj points out, however, that in its popularity hybridity risks becoming an essentialist opposite to the now denigrated “cultural purity.”² Hybridity is, moreover, a term still fraught with connotations of origins and redemption: two discrete entities combine to produce a third that is capable of resolving its “parental” contradictions. Hybridity, however, in this schema does not extricate us from a self/other dualism and the implication of loss and redemption in the formation of the third term.

In looking for a way out of such reductionism, Marcos Becquer and José Gatti proposed that we reconsider the notion of syncretism, which is not synonymous with hybridity.³ They argue that syncretism has the advantage of implying not fixed elements but a contingent affiliation of disparate terms capable of shifting positions or altering relations depending on circumstances, and whose boundaries are permeable. They also argue that the term be re-politicized from its de-politicized passage through religious discourse, as a way to think through the possibility of individual agency. In any case, conceived as a dynamic process, syncretism allows that between disparate factors there is no simple translation, but an element of untranslatability, which is a potential space of productive renewal.

It is difficult to make a clear distinction between hybridity and syncretism in a work of art; but I want to offer one in a rather anecdotal way. The Mexican film of 1992, *Nuevo mundo*, concerned the miraculous appearance of the Virgin of Guadalupe in sixteenth-century Mexico, proposing, somewhat heretically, that it was the Catholic Church itself that invented her out of political expediency. The bishop discovers Aztec “idols” hidden behind the images of Catholic saints in the church, assuming that his Indians had not, after all, been converted. His interrogations fail to produce a culprit. The clergy, abstaining from punishing the Indians for fear of another uprising, hit on a compromise: the Catholic icon-maker was to paint an image of the Madonna using an Indian model, take it secretly to the shrine of Tonanzin, the Aztec “earth mother,” and then claim that he had painted it from a vision. In fact, the “Indianized” Virgin did serve to pacify some of the unrest amongst the colonized Mexicans and Spanish colonials fretting about their forced allegiances to Spain: Guadalupe was a Mexican-born symbol with which all could identify, and as such, redemptive. It was, nonetheless, a “hybrid” manufactured (in this account) by the Church and seamlessly translated into Christian orthodoxy as if Tonanzin’s identity had been absorbed by the Virgin. What remains syncretic in this tale, however, is the tactic of the Indian painter, who was indeed the maker of both Aztec and Catholic icons, and whose masquerading shrines – a doubled system – gave the Indians a spiritual choice.

The Americas as well as Africa are replete with such examples in which resistance to the aggressively imposed culture takes the form of a conscious but concealed masquerade, where the alien sign is used to disguise the meaning of the repressed referent, or where only those signs whose meanings can be remotivated to the subordinated symbolic order are adopted. It may look like

ambivalence from the “outside,” but it is a subversive statement for those on the “inside.” Such tactics do not necessarily produce a loss of cultural meaning, but an *elaboration*; the repressed elements survive in some form within the interstices of the institutionalized language, contaminating it with a pulsion or murmur always ready to destabilize its syntactical and semantic fields, and hence, its established meanings.

Without substituting one imperfect cultural model for another, we can begin to speculate that whereas hybridity hinges on the visibility of a sign that seeks to establish itself and attempt to resolve ambiguity, syncretism is concerned with constantly mobile relations that operate on the structure of languages and at the level of *performance*.

Art practice that seeks a place from which to speak and be heard almost inevitably means dissenting from the prevailing institutionalized language. The issue at stake is the structure of spectatorship – the mode of address by which art seeks a rapport with its audience. Where radicality is assumed to lie simply in the “message,” we are in the territory of already circulating signs and meanings, of “information,” of the language of the already known (even if unacknowledged) together with its attendant value judgments, which does not open a new space of the imagination. To produce the latter means finding a way of speaking that cannot lie only in the common patterns of signification, but in attending to how the receiver inhabits language itself.

Here I should like to touch on the work of three artists, Jimmie Durham, Gabriel Orozco, and Santi Quesada, who live and work among a plurality of cultural signs. Durham recognized that it was precisely the commodified forms of language that somehow needed to be challenged. He played a number of rhetorical strategies throughout the 1980s, one of which was to parody the metalanguage of ethnography – a Western academic discipline historically complicit with the repression of native American cultures – exemplified by the installation of *faux*-ethnographic artifacts, *On Loan from the Museum of the American Indian*, 1985. While the work satisfied a notion that the “othered” artist might speak through disguise or masquerade, as Durham himself realized, it was still too dependent for effect on visible signs of otherness, even if these were reflections of Eurocentric stereotypes. The same problem was inherent in his attempts at undermining Western aesthetics through a strategy of neo-primitivism – playing the *idiot sauvage*, or expressing a child-like incompetence, as in the series of drawings on Caliban’s struggle with the identity imposed by Prospero. For Durham, the neo-primitivist aspect of the work was ultimately too appealing to a white audience seeking a redemptive pre-industrial utopia.

Durham has played out the problem of cultural identity to its limits as an infinite mirroring of selves and others, multiplying and inverting expected identities, all of which pointed out the fundamental *inauthenticity* of any identity. The sign as standing in for or representing what is crucially absent or an imaginary phantasm can be nothing but inauthentic. *Not Lothar Baumgarten’s Cherokee* (Figure 25.1) presented the incommensurability between the phantasmic self and other through the

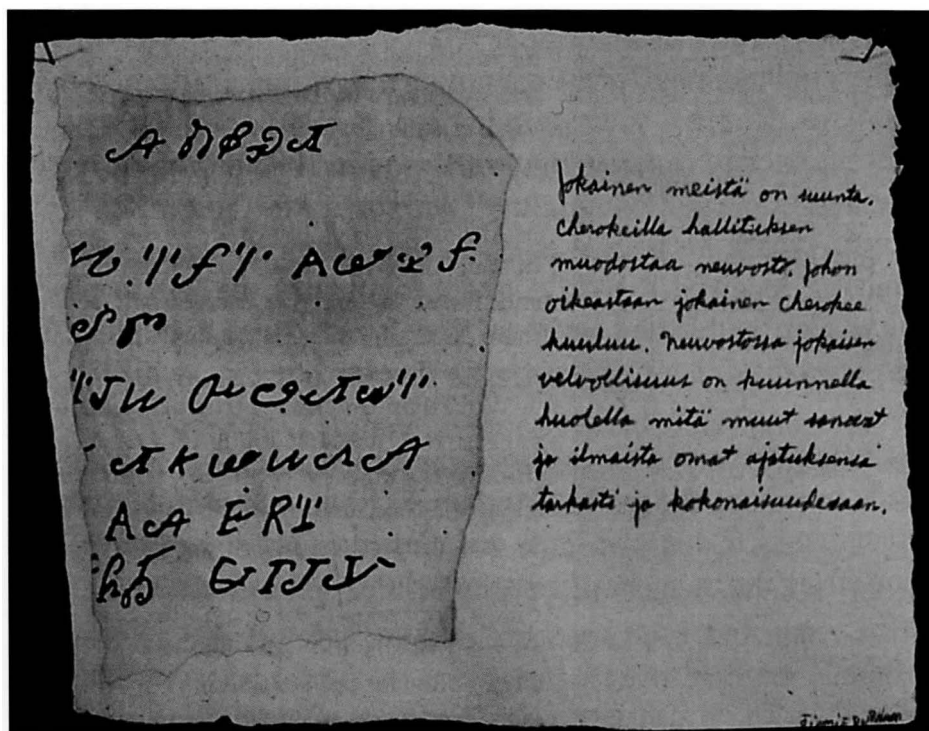


Figure 25.1 Jimmie Durham, *Not Lothar Baumgarten's Cherokee*, 1990, photocopy on parchment paper. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

juxtaposition of two marginalized languages, Finnish and Cherokee. It signaled a space of untranslatability that refused to allow us to map ourselves as coherent subjects of knowledge, exposing our own otherness or discontinuity within Durham's discursive field. At base, Durham's work is less about "cultural identity" than about effects of language, shifting the debate from the all-too-visible exotic and therefore silenced body to the speaking body.

Gabriel Orozco made a virtue out of near invisibility and transience in much of his work of the early 1990s. His materials have included dust, a trace of breath on a piano, consumer items rearranged in a supermarket, or sand balls camouflaged in rocks. The work emerges out of a pre-given substratum that one might imagine as either an effect of a viral contamination or the logical effect of energy on matter – art is nothing if not the mutual articulation of thought, matter, and body. And this is what is expressed in *Mis manos son mi corazón*, 1990: a lump of brick clay squeezed in the hands and fired to produce a bony heart. It figures the process of art-making, as well as the ossification of the over-worn bleeding heart symbol of Mexico. The process of recycling, or remotivation of signs, alludes moreover to culture's processes of return and transformation, and to the salvaging practices in countries where waste and shit are part of the life process [see plate 13].

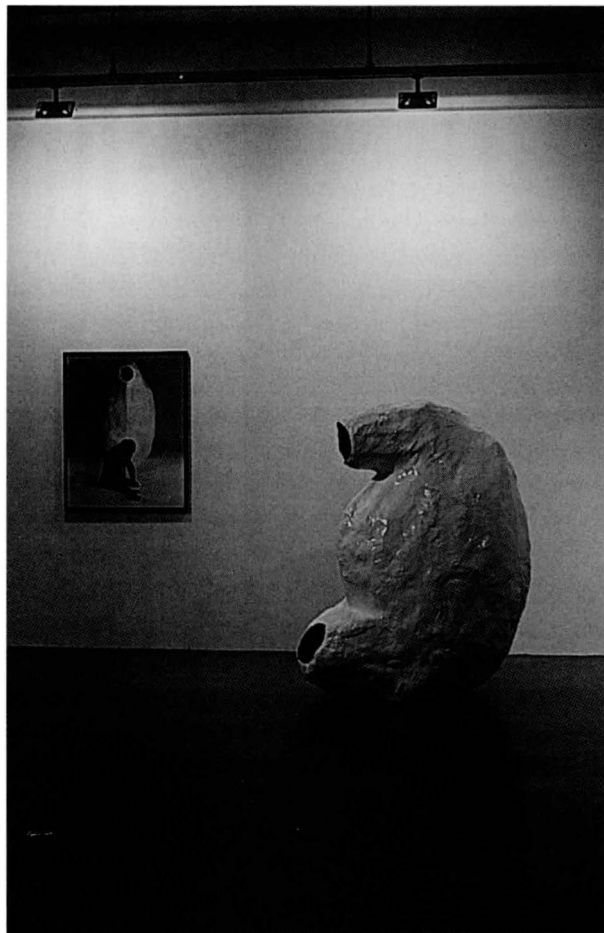


Figure 25.2 Santi Quesada, *Three Faces and One Ideology*, 1996. B/w photo (100 × 80 cm) and polyester sculpture (163 × 135 × 110 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

That culture is a process of renewal, transformed through imaginative work, individual and collective, on language, is central to the work of Santi Quesada, an artist who relocated from Cuba to Britain, from Spanish to English. An early painting shows two figures sitting on a beach, an overload of lines drawn into the paint making uncertain their boundaries. A third, stick-like figure emerges energetically between them disturbing their tranquillity with an invective of neologisms.

What these and other structural maneuvers suggest is an understanding of existence not through the objective world in itself but in the sometimes obscured structures of its relations – in the transactions and transformative processes that ensue from our encounters between things and people, or from the continuous recycling of shit and waste into new products – a metaphor for the continuous reinvention of language from common resources. This imagination that seeks a syncretic solution without the signs of otherness produces chimeras, as in *Fourteen Drawings and One Ideology*, 1995: drawn and sculptural forms that derive from the artist's invention of an “ur-figure” that could stand for the multidirectional potency of life. Or the forms may allude to the circuit of life, death, and resurrection. The related *Three Faces and One Ideology*, 1996 (Figure 25.2), in which a syntactical relation is

made between the image of the artist photographed “emerging” from the object together with the sculpture itself, would seem to figure the concept of death and resurrection in language itself. The object, primordial and not-yet-codifiable, itself inhabits that space between potentiality and realization, realized, ultimately, through the viewer's imaginative intervention: identity born of the syncretic imagination may follow many pathways.

This site of the as-yet-unnameable provides no privileged locus in terms of origin or destination and hence no “authentic” or visible identity by which to trap the subject. It is the “no-place” where language falters, where it exposes its own indeterminacy, and therefore is the space of *trans-action* from which one can begin again, in the spirit of Hélio Oiticica, the collaborative work of aesthetic invention, play, and transformation.

Notes

For his discussion of hybridity, see Homi Bhabha, "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority Under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817," in *Race, Writing and Difference*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 163–84.

- 2 Sarat Maharaj, "Perfidious Fidelity: The Untranslatability of the Other," in *Global Visions: Towards a New Internationalism in the Visual Arts*, ed. J. Fisher (London: inIVA and Kala Press, 1994), pp. 28–35.
- 3 Marcos Becquer and José Gatti, "Elements of Vogue," *Third Text* 16/17 (1991): 65–81.